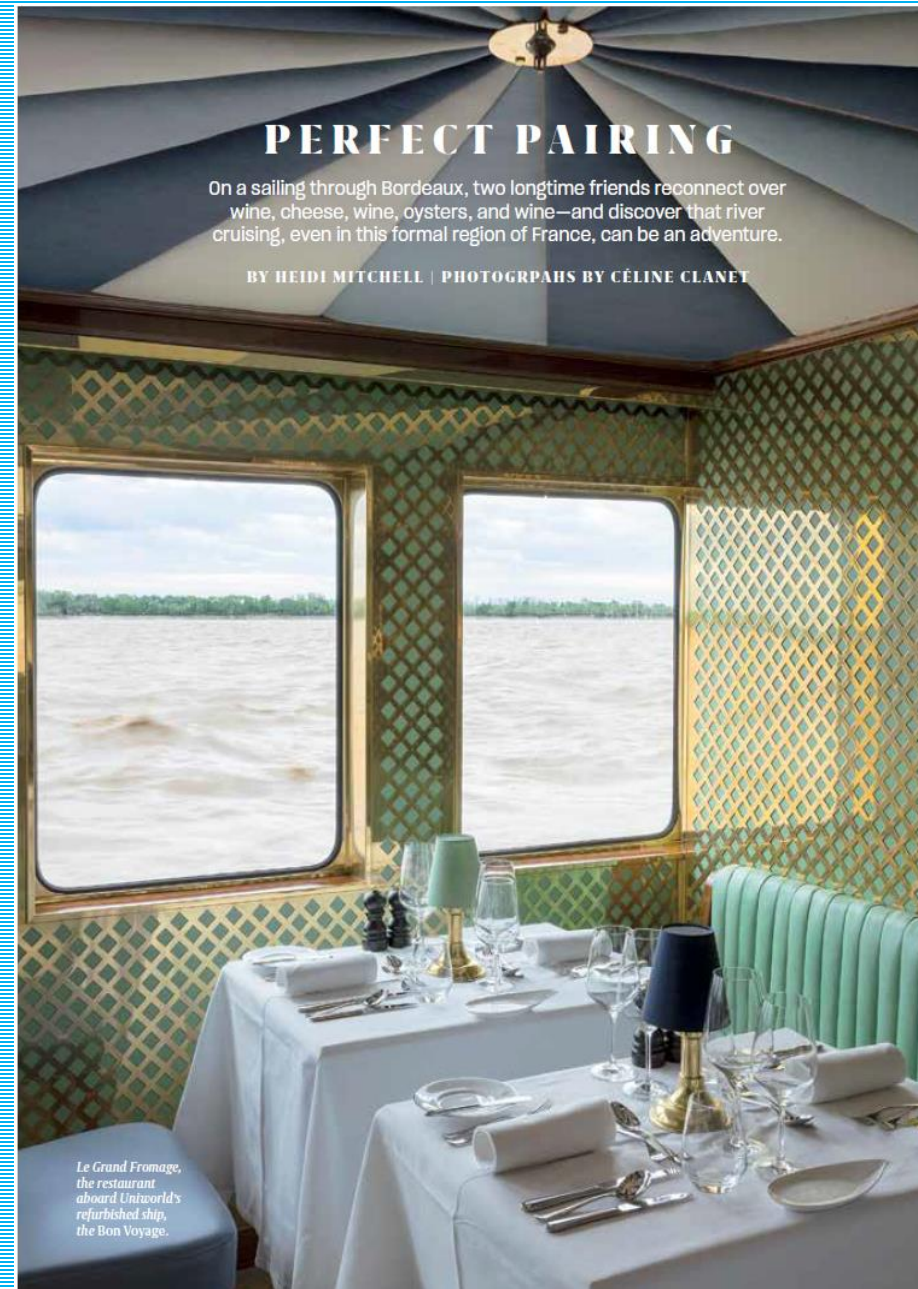


AND NOW WE ARE RIVER CRUISERS

Uniworld Debuts the *S. S. Bon Voyage*
TRAVEL + LEISURE September Food Issue
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DECKE/ROYAL

DECKE/ROYAL





▲ From left: Château Pichon Baron, a wine estate outside the village of Pauillac; oysters at the market in nearby Cussac-Fort-Médoc.

THE FORECAST HAD CALLED FOR CLOUDS

with a chance of rain, not the Great Flood. Half-drunk and fully drenched, Michelle and I pedaled furiously through the ancient Médoc wine country, a land of endless gnarled vines on the banks of the Garonne River. For 10 miles, blinded by the lashing rain, I prayed that the three glasses of tangy Pauillac red I'd downed wouldn't cause me to veer into a ditch—and that we hadn't left the sliding door to our balcony open to the elements. (Surely our diligent Bulgarian butler, Dragos, would have closed it?)

We hadn't expected much action on a languid river cruise through southwestern France, but this was no ordinary ship. We were aboard Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection's newly refurbished S.S. *Bon Voyage*, which had emerged from an eight-month makeover inspired by this regal region. In addition to four new suites, the renovation added antiques and original French artworks—a ship built for Bordeaux.

By day three, we'd already experienced morning yoga on top of a 17th-century citadel and a trek through the overgrown grounds of a riverside fortress in Médoc, freshly shucked

oysters in hand. When we returned from our bumpy ride through the vineyards to the ship's Salon Champagne, the lacquered common area inspired by Yves Saint Laurent's Marrakesh villa, our hair was slicked to our faces, our jeans stuck to our thighs—hardly the silhouette we wanted to cut. But Dragos, he didn't judge. He just handed us fluffy dry towels, hot tea, and an invitation to an intimate supper. A dozen or so of the ship's other Americans, all professors, had decided to bring their fellow citizens together in the Cave des Vins for some interesting conversation. A lone Brit, an ex-spy, provided sordid, top-secret stories and belly-aching comic relief.

I'd nearly come on the trip alone. No one's throwing me any pity parties, but trust me when I say it's hard to find a companion for a weeklong river cruise, even in lush, wine-soaked Bordeaux. The misconception about such trips, at least among my set, is that they involve 120 or so seventysomethings queuing for the buffet—hardly a good reason to use up valuable PTO days. Fortunately, Michelle had needed a break from Seattle life, and a seven-night getaway to really anywhere would suffice. In our twenties, we'd backpacked together on complex and ill-conceived trips, but in our mid-forties, we both wanted—no,

yoga, we all walked to Blaye to visit the shop of Leslie Kellen, a South African wine merchant who poured generous glasses of his 2013 Étalon Rouge Cab. “You know it's French wine because It doesn't give you a hangover,” he insisted. From there, we took a bus to Cognac and the 300-year-old House of Rémy Martin, where we toured the cellars, dramatically draped in curtains of spiderwebs that caught the light in their spiral patterns. (They keep out the bugs.) We heard a brief lecture on the revered Louis XIII Cognac, which is aged for 100 years and sells for more than \$3,500 a bottle—too much for us to get a taste.

At dinner the next night, a steward seated us at a table with three fiftysomething girlfriends from Australia and an 80-year-old teacher from northern England. The rare chance to break bread with women from across the world of varying backgrounds and ages was intoxicating. (Or was it the Sémillon that the onboard sommelier so generously poured?) Our boyishly charming waiter, Bruno, forgot the Brit's scallop appetizer, which became a running joke. We'd hide her empty plate and used silverware and pretend she'd never been served, course after course. No dummy, Bruno caught on and won the night: he enlisted the entire waitstaff to sing “Happy Birthday” and deliver a giant chocolate cake to our table, even though it wasn't anyone's birthday. You've got to love a ship where you can befriend someone twice your age and, together, punk (and be punked by) an Italian waiter half of yours.

On Thursday in St.-Émilion, we ran into four fellow passengers (this time, Canadians) who were celebrating a 50th birthday; they had hired a car and driver to venture farther into wine country. Michelle and I declined their invitation to join, instead paying our respects at St.-Émilion Monolithic Church, which was carved into a hillside in the 12th century. Just days before, the world had watched the spire of Notre Dame collapse; we had made a pilgrimage to see its smoldering remains before taking the TGV down to the city of Bordeaux to catch the boat. Now, we were moved almost to tears by this little church in the rock, with its bell tower and elegant Romanesque arches, and we walked around the perimeter for nearly an hour, contemplating humankind's unique devotion to beauty. But, hey, this was still Bordeaux, so when the skies parted, we took refuge at a restaurant on the city's main square and gorged on foie gras, escargots, steak, and wine, wine, wine as unseasonable hail pelted the vineyards.



When we weren't imbibing or cycling in the rain or touring *les châteaux* (Latour! Lagrange! Lafite!), we walked and walked until our blisters popped. I discovered my true calling as a canelé connoisseur while strolling the farmers' markets of Libourne (I even managed to sneak a few pastries past Dragos back to our suite). In Cadillac, we paused for selfies at the Château de Cazeneuve, which the Bourbon king Henry IV inherited from his mother, and ambled through the adjacent park to meet the swans. The *Bon Voyage* passed through the city of Bordeaux three times, giving me the chance to really get to know it. I went for a long run alone during the first stop; on the next, Michelle and I ditched the group to search out the best duck confit in France, far across the railroad tracks. By the third visit, on the penultimate day of the cruise, I felt *bordelaise*. We walked Rue Ste.-Catherine, supposedly the longest pedestrian street in Europe. Though it's lined with stores like H&M and Zara, side streets led to shops devoted solely to leather goods, or cheese, or chocolate, or canelés, or perfume. Along with a new purse, these long walks afforded me time to pepper Michelle with probing questions: *Would*

▲ From left: Canelés at the market in the town of Libourne; vineyards outside St.-Émilion.

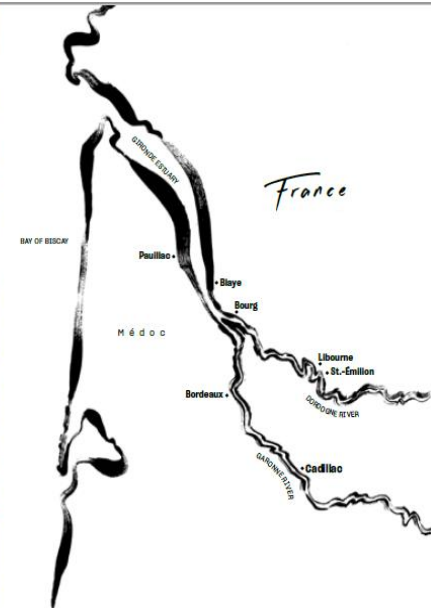
deserved!—an easy breezy week of drinking, hanging out, and eating far too much cheese without having to think too hard about the where, when, and how of travel. Cruising up the Garonne River to the villages of Blaye, Bourg, Médoc, and Pauillac, then down the Dordogne to Cadillac and Libourne—even if we barely left the ship—was just fine.

Still, I managed her expectations. If I'm being honest, I have been unimpressed by riverboats in the past. They can be understaffed and underscheduled, more floating motels than gliding high-end resorts. So we were pleasantly surprised to find our suite's bathroom clad entirely in green marble. Even though we shared the handmade Savoir bed—the same kind London's Savoy Hotel has been ordering since 1905—it granted us middle-aged moms the best sleep we could recall. All those “just-in-case” cocktail dresses I'd packed didn't begin to fill our wardrobe, which was twice the size of my very “adult” closet back home.

And there was way too much to do. Only once did we use the fully equipped gym with a view; we never found time to dip into the infinity pool. Each evening, after long bike rides and many bottles of Sauternes, I'd press a button and a television would drop from the ceiling (because the other one was across the suite, *duh*), and Michelle would let me fall asleep with it on, something forbidden by my husband in our apartment in Chicago. And anyway, having Brian Williams lull me into a coma was all good; there was zero chance we'd oversleep, since Dragos—ever on the hunt for some new way to dazzle us—would awaken us at 6 a.m., having ensured that the eggs delivered to our bed were poached to perfection (four minutes, he insisted), so that we'd be ready for a 7 a.m. deck stretch with the “well-being coach,” Florin. Other onboard offerings included cooking classes, wine tastings, lectures on World War II, cancan lessons, and jewelry shopping. And the food! After just a few multicourse meals, staff in the Grand Fromage restaurant knew each of the 124 passengers so well they could determine where to seat us and who might want to skip the soup or a second dessert in favor of two entrées—because sometimes a mere mortal simply can't choose between beef tenderloin and lobster meunière.

Michelle and I self-sorted into an active group of some 30 or so guests under 50, and together, we packed the itinerary. On the first full day, after

▼ From top: Château de Cazeneuve, once owned by Henry IV; wine tasting at the 500-year-old Château Soutard, near St.-Emilion.



Bordeaux by Boat

you consider Botox? Who's the mother of Devon's baby I see on Facebook? What's it like to be a single mom? What level are you on Bejeweled? You know—life's most important questions, the ones you can only ask a friend you've known for 30 years and with whom you'd comfortably share a horsehair bed and a third serving of Roquefort.

Towns I'd never heard of are now some of my favorite places in France—villages hard to access by car or plane, perhaps worthy of just a day's visit but ideally suited to approaching by riverboat. Without the slowly skating *Bon Voyage*, Michelle and I would never have sneaked all those castles, all those châteaux, all those cathedral towns into one week, or even one lifetime. By the end, we were completely exhausted. A boring river cruise? Hardly. We still missed so much that we could have gone on twice as long. At the last supper, I settled into our final soufflé and scanned Le Grand Fromage as it grew loud and boisterous. My fellow adventurers, all just as sauced as me, somehow looked brand-new. “Who are all these partiers we've been travelling with?” I asked Michelle. Her answer: “They are us. And we are river cruisers.” ♦

THE VOYAGE

The eight-day Brilliant Bordeaux Itinerary from **Uniwold Boutique River Cruise Collection** sails the Garonne and Dordogne, as well as the Gironde Estuary where the two rivers meet. Excursions include private vineyard tours, château visits, and guided walks. Special Connoisseur Collection sailings include even more exclusive experiences, like a Cognac tasting at Rémy Martin. uniworld.com; sailings available March–November; from \$2,499 per person, all-inclusive.


GETTING THERE

From Paris, Air France offers multiple inexpensive flights daily to Bordeaux-Mérignac Airport—the hop takes

just over an hour. For a more scenic transfer, you can take the high-speed train (TGV) to Bordeaux St.-Jean station in about 2½ hours.

TRIP EXTENSIONS

Maximize your experience by adding a few days pre- or post-cruise. **Valerie Ann Wilson** (valeriew@vwti.com; 212-632-3400), an industry pro and member of the T-L A-List, recently planned a French river cruise followed by a few days exploring the Médoc peninsula. “There is nothing wine lovers enjoy more,” she says, “than driving along the Route des Châteaux just north of Bordeaux, with row upon row of vineyards as far as the eye can see.”



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